

Effective Practice in Education

Professional development case studies in
Auckland and Northland schools

Working with lead teachers on a targeted programme to develop student literacy





*Caitlyn Jelleyman and Saranya Viswanathan
discuss their novel studies*

Stepping ahead with literacy

How walkthroughs, modeling, observations, feedback and a focus on data are helping to shape a professional learning programme for teachers to target student achievement in reading

Three years ago, literacy leaders from five central Auckland schools met to plan a development programme focused on student literacy. This cluster of five schools - Waikowhai Intermediate, Kowhai Intermediate, Wesley Intermediate and Balmoral School, along with nearby Mt Albert Grammar School - sourced Ministry of Education funding to inquire into teacher practice in the classroom to improve student literacy achievement.

In 2009, Liz McLachlan, a literacy facilitator at Team Solutions at The University of Auckland's Faculty of Education, began working with the cluster schools. The specific focus of the professional development was to look at how teachers could use the information from asTTle to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom to raise student achievement. This work was also supported by the Ministry of Education's Literacy Development Officer Carol Stoney.

The funding for the cluster allowed literacy leaders in all four schools to have some teacher release time to meet across the cluster and observe classes, to analyse literacy achievement data and use the data to inquire into teaching practice.

Based on the evidence provided by asTTle, Mary Rea, associate principal and literacy leader at Balmoral School, and principal Malcolm Milner, identified that literacy in the intermediate school was an area they

wanted to target in 2009. "From the data analysis a decision was made to focus on year 7 and 8 and also because these can be challenging years in terms of differentiation," says Mary.

This case study looks at the work of Team Solutions facilitator Liz McLachlan with Balmoral School - one of the schools in the cluster. Liz worked with literacy leaders Catherine Loney (year 7), Erynn Riesterer (year 8) and Mary Rea to plan and deliver professional development in the school throughout the year as well as attending the ongoing cluster meetings for two mornings per term.

Scoping professional development needs

One of the first things Liz did as a facilitator was to scope the professional development needs of the year 7 and 8 teachers at Balmoral School. To do this, she talked with teachers about their practice and observed them teaching in the classroom. She also looked at the school's current student achievement data in literacy, especially in reading.

"Liz did a lot of good work right at the start of the year and this gave us momentum," notes principal Malcolm Milner. "Liz quickly built up a rapport with our staff. She has helped us sustain this development. Teachers are feeling positive about what Liz has done."

A literacy walkthrough

Focus	Allocate 1, 2, or 3 for each of the three foci
A / Learning Foci and Success Criteria	
- visual and discussed	
- student awareness /working with	
- assessing	
- revisited	
- model used	
- task matches the learning	
- learning talk T - S / S - S	
B/ Materials to Support/Scaffold Learning	
- modelling book	
- word supports	

Before developing an action plan for professional development with Balmoral School, Liz conducted a series of 'literacy walkthroughs' in the classrooms. A literacy walkthrough is a process developed by Joyce Reeves, team leader for literacy at Team Solutions, to gather baseline information on literacy teaching effectiveness, classroom dynamics, relationships between teachers and students and classroom structures.

The aim is to identify areas where teacher effectiveness could be

improved through professional development specifically targeted at raising student achievement in literacy.

During the initial walkthrough, Liz spent around fifteen minutes in each year 7 and 8 classroom observing literacy learning in action.

The purpose was to gather school wide evidence of teacher practice specifically for literacy teaching and learning, including:

- how the teacher identifies and communicates the learning intention and success criteria for the lesson
- whether students are engaged in a variety of purposeful literacy activities related to the learning intention
- whether the learning intention and success criteria are co-constructed with the students
- how conversations between the teacher and students and between students focus on learning
- how learning is supported in the classroom by the use of tools and resources such as models, questioning, and a class library
- differentiated learning, organisation of the class, cultural aspects and routines.

Considering the data

The information gathered as a result of the walkthroughs was considered together with student asTTle data, and other evidence of teacher practice such as formal observations and feedback discussions. This was used to inform a school-wide professional development plan for literacy at Balmoral School.

Liz facilitated sessions for the intermediate teachers on using asTTle assessments and resources to promote effective literacy practice, especially in reading. She assisted teachers to develop a clear purpose for reading instruction, communicate this to the students and refer back to it throughout the lesson.

Based on the asTTle results, each teacher identified a target group of students whose achievement they would focus on as part of this professional development process.

Strategies for targeted students

The targeted students were those in year 7 and 8 who achieved at level 2 or level 3 in the asTTle reading test. Teachers identified the learning intentions and success criteria for each of these students and planned reading comprehension strategies accordingly.

Liz helped teachers develop greater awareness of the array of comprehension strategies and teacher approaches to literacy, centred on material from the *Assessment Resource Banks*¹, *Literacy Learning Progressions*² and *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8*³.

Two key areas that emerged from the walkthroughs were the need for more effective modeling and further development of teachers' skills with observation and feedback on each other's practice.

In-depth observations

Balmoral School made a deliberate decision to allow teachers to engage with Liz in their own classrooms and have individual discussions about their teaching practice. This allowed teachers to have open conversations with the facilitator without the presence of senior management. "The feedback from the observations goes to individual teachers not to senior management," says associate principal Mary Rea. "We are alerted to the trends and patterns, but we want the detailed feedback to be secure and private to teachers."

Liz conducted a series of in-depth observations of the year 7 and 8 teachers each term. After each round of observations she interviewed each teacher to ask them what they hoped to achieve from in-class modeling.

As a result of this process, teachers set a goal that was related to their specific needs and the students' needs. The opportunity to feedforward meant that teachers had greater ownership of their own professional learning. "The interviews were really useful," says Liz. "We were able to informally chat about beliefs and philosophies and talk about espoused theories and how these are put into practice in the classroom."

As literacy leaders, Catherine and Erynn worked with Liz on the first round of observations. They learned what to look for and how to manage the process. "We felt it was important to have our own people feeding



Differentiated learning in a year 7 class at Balmoral School means students work in pairs, groups and individually around their learning intentions. Here, Joshua Thompson-Brown reads for his novel study.



Literacy leader Catherine Loney shares learning intentions and success criteria with a group of year 7 students at Balmoral School. Students (from left): Caroline Butler, Olivia Kingsley-Smith, Henry King, Natalie Dunn and Sean Kelly.

back,” says Mary. Catherine and Erynn conducted their first observations in term 2.

Liz supported Catherine and Erynn, offering guidance and feedback to build their capabilities to sustain and build on the shifts in teaching practice. “Liz has set us on fire,” says Catherine. “After the fantastic professional development we’ve had this year, we’re really excited about continuing the momentum moving forward.”

In-class modeling

Once a term, teachers were timetabled to observe Liz or another teacher model effective literacy teaching in a classroom. “The first round of modeling was focused on explaining why I’m doing what I’m doing,” notes Liz, “As we did further modeling, I provided a running commentary and checked what the teacher was noticing. That process helps to make everything more explicit and the students are involved too. Everyone knows that we are all learning to do something a bit different.” Liz works with the teacher after a modeled lesson to co-construct their next steps and identify what they might try differently next time.

The response from teachers has been encouraging. The modeling and observation cycle each term has enabled teachers to develop new ways of engaging students in their learning. It has also provided them with validation for the effective ways they are currently working with students in the classroom.

Shifts in teacher practice

The professional development this year has seen a shift to more differentiated learning for the teaching of reading. Teachers focus on a small group of students and work with them directly on a learning intention and success criteria, co-constructed with the group. Students not working with the teacher will either be in groups or work individually depending on their learning intention. All students are clearer about their learning intentions and the focus of their learning. “The literacy classes are now buzzing when you walk into them,” says Mary.

“There has been a shift in the way learning intentions and success criteria are co-constructed with the students,” says Liz. Having conducted a second walkthrough in term 4 to assess the shifts in teaching practice

she notes that students have been more focused on their learning intentions. “It’s great to see growing cooperation within a student group, even when they are not working directly with the teacher.”

Teachers have now also developed a range of resource materials, many of them based on school journals. They also identify questions for their targeted students based on their strategies for those students.

Student achievement and engagement

Liz notes a shift in student engagement in their reading, “More students at Balmoral are now able to articulate and identify specific strategies such as visualising, reading on, inference and using prior knowledge when they get ‘stuck’ with their reading.”

In 2009, the cluster literacy leaders decided to conduct the second asTTle test of the year in term 3 rather than late in term 4 as had been the case previously. The purpose was to use the data gathered in term 3 to inform more focused teaching practice for the remainder of the year. “In our school, year 7 asTTle results have gone up 54 points and year 8 up 47 points - that’s a huge shift in achievement,” says Mary.

The last word

At Balmoral School, principal Malcolm Milner is keen to maintain the strong focus on literacy. “Liz’s skill as a Team Solutions facilitator meant that we developed a learning relationship with her,” says Malcom. “It’s the learning that goes on as a result of this kind of work that is so important.”

“Our teachers feel comfortable with Liz and the knowledge that she has,” he says. Mary Rea adds, “Liz has a passion for literacy. It’s about establishing that learning relationship.”

Liz recognises that the involvement of senior leadership in the professional development programme has been vital. “The support from Malcolm, Mary and literacy leaders Catherine and Erynn has been essential for keeping the strong focus on literacy teaching and learning.”

“Every teacher is different,” says Liz. “Each one of them did something new and made a shift in their teaching practice.”

Findings from the Literacy Professional Development Project

Findings from the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP) contain material relevant to those in the education sector interested in teacher practice focused on improving student learning in literacy.

Much of the LPDP's research into facilitation has centred on the interactions that occur between teachers and facilitators of professional learning as the facilitators conduct lesson observations. The LPDP's research demonstrates that a theory for observing and providing feedback on teacher practice should include the following components.

- A facilitator's suggestions for improved practice should be linked to an analysis of an observed lesson, and that analysis should be conducted jointly with the teacher.
- A facilitator's analysis and suggestions should be explicit so that teachers clearly understand the relevance of the suggestions to their practice. Facilitators should not assume that their suggestions are helpful, rather they should offer them as possible practices that may or may not translate well into the teacher's personal practice context.

- A facilitator should link their suggestions to other professional learning opportunities that the teacher has experienced. This will provide a reference point for teachers, which will help them to understand the theories behind the facilitator's suggestions and encourage them to transfer the ideas to other parts of their practice.
- If learning is to be sustained, it is important that facilitators do more than suggest "next steps" for teaching. Teachers need to be helped to set explicit goals for themselves and to develop strategies for monitoring their progress towards those goals.

Source: 'Improving Learning for All: Learning from the Literacy Professional Development Project.' This document is part of a set of materials for teachers and school leaders that summarises research articles and milestone reports from New Zealand's Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP). The content of these reports has been sourced from previously published research conducted by the researchers (Professor Helen Timperley and Associate Professor Judy Parr from The University of Auckland) working within LPDP, in partnership with project members.

The full set is available online at www.literacyonline.tki.org.nz

References

- ¹ Ministry of Education (2009). *Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs)* are collections of assessment resources for English, Maths and Science developed by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research on contract to the Ministry of Education. Available online at <http://arb.nzcer.org.nz>.
- ² Ministry of Education (2007). *Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum*. Learning Media.
- ³ Ministry of Education (2006). *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8*. Learning Media.

Acknowledgements

Effective Practice in Education: Professional development case studies in Auckland and Northland schools is a series of case studies that has been developed to demonstrate effective ways that schools work in partnership with Team Solutions. Each case study looks at innovative professional learning partnerships that bring about sustainable change in teaching practice to improve student achievement and engagement.

It is important we continue to share case studies of effective practice in literacy education. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (p6) clearly outlines the importance of literacy learning: "As language is central to learning and English is the medium for most learning in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, the importance of literacy in English cannot be overstated."

School leaders interested in further reading on literacy learning can visit www.literacyonline.tki.org.nz

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Te kāhui akoranga ngaio



Camilla Highfield, Director

Team Solutions literacy contacts for Auckland and Northland schools

Team Solutions provides quality professional development to support teachers and leaders in Auckland and Northland schools. It is an integral part of the Faculty of Education at The University of Auckland. In most instances the service provided by Team Solutions is funded through the Ministry of Education.

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